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ABSTRACT

CHOICE (Career Help at Overbrook for Individuals Who Choose Employment) has been identified as an exemplary school-to-work program that includes students with disabilities. This program at Overbrook School for the Blind in Philadelphia serves students with a primary disability of blindness or severe visual impairment. Many have additional disabilities including mental retardation, cognitive and physical disabilities, and hearing impairments. Students aged 16-21 from Overbrook, area public schools, and college students are authorized by local vocational rehabilitation agencies to participate. The program provides students paid summer work experience to sharpen the vocational skills they acquire during the regular school year. The program has three components: individual student assessment, selective job development, and job support services. CHOICE has the three basic elements of school-to-work: school-based learning, work-based learning, and connecting activities. Overbrook teaching staff serve as job developers and trainers to gain a first-hand look at the importance of developing vocational competencies. Critical to CHOICE's success is the collaboration that has been developed and maintained with a variety of employers. Every student is assisted by a job coach who helps the student get acclimated to the job and regularly visits the work site to observe the student's progress. During the job development and job support phases, students and job coaches conduct sensitivity training to educate employers about visual disabilities. (YLB)

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ED 420 799

CHOICE

Career Help at Overbrook for Individuals who Choose Employment

Overbrook School for the Blind
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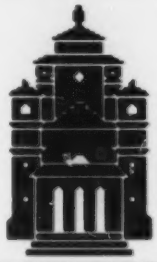
(215) 877-0313



Mission/Goals

To provide students with visual disabilities paid summer work experience to sharpen the vocational skills they acquire during the regular school year. The program aims to (*a*) assist students in developing work readiness and socialization skills, (*b*) assist in their transition planning, and (*c*) provide students with a variety of work experience opportunities and avenues that could lead to permanent employment.

Organization/Program Context

Overbrook School for the Blind, a nonprofit corporation, is a dynamic and responsive educational organization. Its mission is to provide leadership as a local, national, and international resource to develop and deliver education that enhances options for persons with visual impairments to experience active and fulfilling lives. Throughout the school year students at Overbrook prepare for entry into the world of work through classroom study and hands-on training at work sites in the community. During the summer students continue to sharpen their vocational skills through a paid work experience, the CHOICE program (Career Help at Overbrook for Individuals who Choose Employment). Students and their families who decide to participate in CHOICE come from Overbrook School for the Blind, area public high schools, and colleges. CHOICE uses paid work experiences in local businesses and the help of job coaches to prepare students for future employment. These experiences give students greater exposure to various choices in the world of work thus creating an easier transition to more permanent work. In addition, the program offers rich benefits to the students and their families, businesses, and the community by creating positive attitudes about persons with visual disabilities and a "can do" feeling among all participants.

Description

Students participating in CHOICE are referred to the program either by the Pennsylvania Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services (BVS), by parents, or by previous teachers or students. Major funding for the program is provided by BVS. Every summer about 20 to 35 students participate in the program.

There are three components to the program.

Individual Student Assessment. Once selected for the program, every student is assigned to a job developer. Each job developer works with an average of three students. The job developer conducts an initial assessment of the student to determine their skills and specific work needs. This assessment involves reviewing the student's records and conducting a student interview.

Selective Job Development. Following the assessment, the student and the

Contact Persons

Mr. Patrick J. Mitchell
Employment Program Coordinator
(215) 877-0313, ext. 219

Ms. Andrea Williams
CHOICE Program Coordinator
(215) 877-0313, ext. 345

Community Setting

Urban and suburban areas of the metropolitan Philadelphia region. Overbrook is a private chartered school providing special education services for students with blindness and visual impairment.

Population Served

All the students served by the program have a primary disability of blindness or severe visual impairment. Many students have additional disabilities including mental retardation, cognitive and physical disabilities, and hearing impairments. Students ages 16 to 21 from Overbrook, area public schools, and college students authorized by local vocational rehabilitation agencies participate in the program.

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Program Staff

Employment Program Coordinator
1 part time
- Conducts the general administration of the program
- Coordinates the funding and staffing needs of the program

CHOICE Program Coordinator
1 full time
- Supervises the staff
- Manages the daily operations of the project
- Maintains student records and reports
- Recruits staff and conducts staff training

Employment Training Specialist
20 to 35 part time depending on the number of students
- Conducts student and family interviews
- Provides selective job placement activities for the students
- Trains students in job tasks and work socialization skills
- Provides technical assistance to employers
- Completes daily job progress reports of the students

Clerical Typist
3 part time
- Performs general clerical tasks such as copying, filing, etc.
- Data entry of the job training reports
- Keeps records of the billing and service provisions

job developer formulate a plan to find employment that matches the student's skills and interests as well as employers' needs. The job development plan requires the student and his or her family to take an active role in the job seeking process. This includes investigating job leads, going for interviews, and following up with potential employers. A key element during this phase of the program is to ensure that a student gains varied work experiences which is accomplished by having the student do assignments with different area employers from one summer to the next. The job developer helps to obtain appropriate employment by making a site visit to appraise the job. If the job meets the student's interests and skills, an employment interview is arranged. If the interview is successful, a job offer is made.

Job Support Services. Once hired, every student is expected to carry out the requirements of the job. The job coach works with the student to get acclimated with the job and then visits the work site periodically to observe the student's progress or to teach the student the job tasks. Job support in the form of a job coach ensures that every student has the support necessary to experience the greatest success in the program. The employer is an integral part of the support plan and provides regular feedback on the student's progress which is documented by weekly written reports and a summary at the end of the student's program.

Exemplary School-to-Work Components

School-based Learning

Teaching staff as job developers. Overbrook teaching staff also serve as job developers and trainers thus providing them with a firsthand look at the importance of developing vocational competencies. The staff can assist students in developing these competencies during the academic year with the aid of classroom assignments.

Work-based Learning

Collaboration. Critical to the success of CHOICE is the collaboration that has been developed and maintained with a variety of employers including several hospital, retail stores, child care centers, offices, and restaurants. Having students with visual disabilities working in several different kinds of work environments helps to increase the community awareness of persons with visual disabilities.

Job Coaching. Every student is assisted by a job coach. The job coach helps the student get acclimated to the job and then regularly visits the work site to observe the student's progress. The job coach can also assist in teaching job tasks and be present at the site most of the time, if needed. This helps the students learn varied work tasks and workplace socialization behaviors resulting in enhanced confidence and a "can do" attitude critical for achieving permanent employment as an adult. The employers also learn about the skills and work competencies of students with visual disabilities and ways to accommodate the work environments.

Connecting Activities

Sensitivity awareness training. During the job development and job support phases sensitivity awareness trainings are conducted both by the students with visual disabilities and job coaches to help educate employers about visual disabilities.

What Makes it Work?

- CHOICE is oriented toward the needs of the students as well as the businesses.
- CHOICE offers employer services such as job coaching and training whenever necessary.
- There is effective job matching of students along with a strong local employer base.
- The regular teaching staff are available to provide critical job support at individual work sites during the summer.
- CHOICE offers choices in terms of work-sites and jobs thus giving greater exposure to the students.

Maria's Story

When Maria, a student with visual impairments, was in high school she participated in the CHOICE program to compliment her academic instruction and extra curricular activities. Maria took an active role with her CHOICE job developer during the job seeking process. CHOICE presented Maria various job opportunities in the clerical and child care areas.

One summer, Maria worked as a clerical assistant at a major pharmaceutical company where she answered the phone and took short messages without a CHOICE job trainer. The next summer in the same clerical assistant position and with limited guidance and consultation of a CHOICE job trainer, Maria added on several job tasks including filing, copying, faxing, making arrangements for departmental training seminars, and light typing. This experience increased the variety and complexity of Maria's work assignments and helped her gain greater skills, confidence, and experience. In addition, Maria worked in a child-care setting where she worked with children ranging in age from 6 months to 3 years. She worked 30 hours a weeks for about 8 weeks. Her duties included helping with the daily living activities, assisting the teacher with reading, play, trips, and administration. Her involvement in CHOICE helped Maria make an informed decision about picking child-care as her career.

Maria has since graduated from high school and is attending a junior college, majoring in early childhood education. In a recent article in her school's quarterly newsletter Maria said the following about the CHOICE program. "It's great! It prepares you for the real world. If you don't have this kind of experience you don't know what the real world is like and how people act."

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For Further Information

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(612)626-7220; fax (612)624-9344
http://www.ici.coled.umn.edu/schooltowork/

School-to-work is described in the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994.

School to work is . . .

A System built to provide opportunities for students to learn about and experience work while in school.

Educational Reform that addresses the need for students to gain work experience and workplace skills while in school.

Partnerships between schools, employers and communities.

For <u>All</u> Students, kindergarten through 12th grade.

School-to-Work Outreach Project Overview

The School-to-Work Outreach Project at the Institute on Community Integration (UAP) is a nationwide, three year project funded by the U.S. Department of Education. This project assists and supports school-to-work initiatives through the identification of exemplary school-to-work models/practices/strategies that include students with disabilities. Exemplary school-to-work models/practices/strategies are identified through a five step selection process:

- **Nomination**
- **Application**
- **Reference**
- **Application Review**
- **Final Review and Selection**

Identification Criteria and School-to-Work Priority Areas, established by the School-to-Work Outreach Project, guide the application review.

Profiles of the identified models/practices/strategies are available upon request. Adoption and replication of these exemplary school-to-work activities is encouraged and technical assistance is available to schools and organizations interested in implementing these models/practices/strategies or improving existing school-to-work activities and systems. Contact the School-to-Work Outreach Project at the above address for further information.

Basic Elements of School-to-Work

School-based Learning - Instruction and experiences based on academic and occupational standards.

Work-based Learning - Workplace experience, structured training, mentoring and apprenticeships at job sites.

Connecting Activities - A variety of activities that build and maintain bridges between school, work and other adult environments.

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